

ART + CULTURE

Pilgrimage: Anselm Kiefer at The Margulies Collection

*Conceptual art in a literal
city.*

BY CATHERINE MARY CAMARGO



Martin Z. Margulies is an American real-estate developer, philanthropist, and father of four, born and raised in Yonkers, New York. By the late 1970s he was a confirmed resident of what we call the “art world,” rubbing shoulders with dealers like Shaindy Fenton, Ivan Karp, and later on, with gallery owners Leo Castelli, André Emmerich and Arne Glimcher. Intrigued, he began acquiring a few sculptures and photographs that drew his interest. By 1999, he had acquired a vast warehouse in Wynwood to store and exhibit his evolving collection.

Today, The Margulies Collection at the Warehouse boasts a collection exceeding 5,000 contemporary works, spanning photography, sculpture, painting, installation, and video art. It is one of the world’s most significant collections of contemporary art. Despite this, it is not exactly a Miami hotspot.

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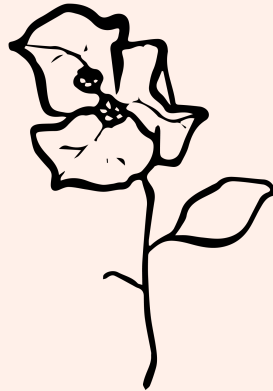
I am a Miami girl at heart. I attended an arts high school (New World School of the Arts), have been an artist, poet, and admirer of art

and writing my whole life. And yet, when it came time to interview for my first job out of college, I was shocked to discover that the Margulies Collection even existed. I was 21 years old, freshly graduated with a BFA in painting. I had just moved back into my parents' house by the Miami River, and was grieving the recent loss of my father. I felt a bit lost the first time I met the Margulies Collection's long-time curator, Katherine Hinds, at the Margulies Collection.

After my interview with Ms. Hinds, I had the chance to explore the Warehouse, where I encountered the works of Anselm Kiefer for the first time.

Born in Donaueschingen, Germany in 1945, Kiefer is one of the most important living artists of the 21st century. His first years of life were marked by the trauma of World War II – his mother gave birth in a hospital cellar, where civilians sheltered from Allied bombs. As a result, his work often deals with the unstable German post-war identity. In 2022, Kiefer was commissioned to create an installation for the Doge's Palace in Venice for the Venice Biennale. He is a recipient of the Praemium Imperiale, one the highest honors available for a living artist. There are even whispers of Kiefer creating artworks

for the proposed restoration of the 861-year-old Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris.



Margulies is home to the largest collection of Kiefer works in the United States. Stepping through the Warehouse's glass doors, making my way past concrete walls covered in art, I encountered Kiefer's breathtaking installation, *Geheimnis der Farne* (The Secret of the Ferns). I felt self-conscious and young –dwarfed by a massive block of concrete filled with charcoal, surrounded on all sides by panels of preserved plants, but still strangely invigorated. It felt as if Kiefer had found a way to compress the past, present, and future –time collapsing in on itself in one room. As if I had stepped into a postmodern tomb, unsure of whether I was confronting the future, history, or some constant more like the horizon.

I later learned the charcoal referenced the human instinct to hoard fuel. “Carbon” and “coal for two thousand years” are inscribed in German across the structures. The walls around *Farne* are inscribed with lines from poetry by Paul Celan, a Romanian-French poet whom Kiefer admired, written in the artist’s own hand. I imagined Kiefer like a mad scientist, scalpel in one hand, gravel in the other, sculpting reality itself with a childlike zeal.

Once I turned my back on *Geheimnis der Farne*, I turned around to face another Kiefer sculpture, this one titled *Ages of the World* (2014). *Ages* is a towering, seventeen feet tall disheveled stack of topsy-turvy canvases interspersed with a variety of natural debris – dried sunflowers, boulders, lead balls and rubble. Needless to say, I realized that I not only wanted, but needed, to work at the Margulies Collection.

Frequently, when I sat at my desk in our open-concept office, a guest would saunter in to recount their initial encounter with the Kiefer – the same combination of shock and awe I experienced on my first day, mixed with a crushing smallness. Each new instance warmed my heart as much as the last. It made me imagine the satisfaction

Martin Margulies must experience, knowing he has brought these masterful pieces to our city.

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After seeing an image of Anselm Kiefer's *Ages of the World* installation in 2014, Martin Margulies was as taken with it as I was on my first day at the Margulies Collection. He traveled to London to see the work in person at the Royal Academy in London. As Margulies himself described the visit: "When people walked in the room, they seemed baffled and confused. [Kiefer's work] elicited a very inquisitive response from the audience and I seized on the opportunity to bring a very exciting work to our audience at the Warehouse."

"Exciting." That word can mean different things to different people. Kiefer's work can be, in various turns, visually jarring, conceptually upsetting, elusive in theme, and prone to produce great feelings of disorientation. Kiefer's works are both technically complex and highly visually impactful, combining feats of minute craftsmanship – like individual feathers on steel wings – with a Stonehenge-esque architectural grandeur. But Kiefer's work is

representative of a particular kind of art, one which prioritizes ideas over easy visual ingestion. Kiefer himself teeters somewhere between an artist and a philosopher; his work visually encapsulates a broad range of cultural, literary, and philosophical allusions – from the Old and New Testament to the poetry of Ingeborg Bachmann and Paul Celon. Kiefer is not the sort of work one would say, want to take a picture next to, or unwind alongside after a long day.

Instead, the joy of Kiefer (and I do believe he is a joy) is following along his conceptual pathways – taking the time to understand why he made the choices he made, and feeling the room shift a little as he expands the contours of your mental limits. A day of Kiefer-viewing is enjoyable like a novel or a black-and-white vintage film. Kiefer offers you an opportunity to elevate yourself, but you have to put in the work.

Kiefer has never tried to be an “easy” artist. During his student years, Kiefer began working on a project titled *Occupations*, in which he staged photographs of himself, then a gangly 24 years old, clad in slightly oversized paramilitary uniforms (later, he wore random outfits like knit dresses), giving the Nazi salute in various locations

across Europe – all of which Germany had occupied during World War II. When the images were published in 1979, they caused a public uproar. And yet upon closer inspection, the photographs were a succinct reflection of many Germans' awkward reluctance to confront their recent, painful past.

Thankfully for art history, by the time he released his controversial *Occupation* series, Kiefer had already undertaken a mentorship with conceptual artist, teacher, and art theorist, Joseph Beuys. Beuys was a prominent figure in the Fluxus art movement (engaged in experimental art and performances and including key avant-garde artists like Yoko Ono, Dick Higgins, and Nam June Paik) during the 1960s. He urged Kiefer to persist in his provocative work and continue to evolve his practice, which grew into the towering sculptures we see today.

Reflecting on his upbringing in a 2019 interview, Kiefer remarked, “When I was growing up, the Holocaust did not exist. No one spoke about it in the sixties...” The revelation of suppressed memory propelled Kiefer to confront difficult histories in his work. His work brushes away the trappings of familiarity; at the same time as he throws

a harsh light on the past, he envisions possibilities for mythic futures. In both his early and later work, Kiefer sees debris and ruins as symbols of new beginnings.

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Margulies likes difficult art. After his first viewing of *Ages of the World* in London, Margulies was sufficiently taken with the work that he decided to visit its enigmatic creator at his home and atelier on the outskirts of Paris the next year. It was there that he first saw *Geheimnis der Farne*; both works now sit on permanent display at the Warehouse.

The story of Margulies and Kiefer is generally emblematic of Mr. Margulies' collecting style; he collects without strategy or calculation, purely seeking out works which excite him. He also seeks out close personal relationships with his artists, particularly those with whom he is intellectually aligned. Kiefer's capacity for independent thought makes it easy for me to understand why he and Martin Margulies have become such close confidants over the past decade. Both men inhabit the most curious and zealous energy.

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In America we lionize the process of remembering our (short) history: we have July 4th parades, any number of children's books to introduce young people to important historical events, and, for adults, Instagram infographics to tell us how to feel about the past. But we want memory to be so spoon-fed, so simplified, that we often avoid the deeper work of reckoning: of feeling the weight of the past, its totality, its horror. What time do we take to confront our history, and the history of our shared world, in Miami?

The process of historical reckoning has interesting analogs with the process of aesthetic appreciation. We like our art like we like our history: simple. Instrumental. We want to go into a museum and know what we are getting – beauty, “meaning” – and get it as quickly and painlessly as possible. But the greatest art does not give up its secrets so easily.

The late Leon Tommy Johnson, another key figure at the Warehouse who has not received nearly enough public recognition, worked alongside Martin Margulies and Katherine Hinds for over fifty years. His

expertise was unparalleled. Leon was the baby of seventeen children, a true southern boy with values to match, born in Tallahassee, Florida. A natural artisan, Leon suggested innovative methods to display and transport installations – like installing wood reinforcements within the walls of the collection to help them withstand the weight of Kiefer’s 200 pound paintings, and building custom steel cages in which to transport Kiefer’s concrete works. The 2,500 square foot room where *Geheimnis der Farne* lives today was built specifically, by Leon, to house Kiefer’s two concrete structures – which, together, weigh over 50,000 pounds.

Even at 76, Leon would joyfully come to work in his prized bright yellow Corvette, blessing our small staff with authentic belly laughs. His passing on July 9th, 2023 was deeply felt by the entire warehouse staff.

Leon served as a compelling example that the pleasures of the “art world” and visual culture need not be exclusive or reserved for the snobby. However, with few notable exceptions such as Miami professor and painter John Bailly, who frequently brought his FIU college honors students to the Warehouse, the frequency of tours from colleges and high schools remained limited,

considering the potential positive learning outcomes. Appreciating conceptual art might demand time and effort, but it shouldn't necessitate an art history Master's degree.

The rough-hewn space that Margulies, Hinds, and Johnson built over the past twenty-five years aims to welcome people from all walks of life. But in Miami, it can be hard to get started in appreciating art history; there is no MET, MOMA, or Whitney, where you can casually spend a Saturday roaming through rooms of Renaissance paintings. As someone who would have greatly benefited from seeing Kiefer's work in school, it brought me joy to see the student groups that did come for tours at the Margulies Collection. I want more of this. I can't say that we had Instagram worthy lighting or a cute cafe in the back (yes, some visitors ask this... are you here for the art or an iced matcha latte and a Wynwood Instagram photo op?) but we did have works by Richard Serra, Carrie Mae Weems, Robert Motherwell, Jannis Kounellis, Luciano Fabro, Isamu Noguchi, and of course – Anselm Kiefer.

It would be too easy for me to dish all of my opinions on Miami's overconsumption of the

“aesthetic” or algorithmic-friendly culture that dominates public perception of the city. And in the past decades, Miami has experienced a notable surge in the presence of high-quality art, both public and private, evident in the vibrantly-adorned walls of Wynwood and the rush of new galleries in Little Haiti and Allapattah. Still, the explicit engagement-baiting of “selfie museums” and 360-degree projected Vincent Van Gogh displays (please don’t ask me on a date to the Van Gogh museum, no offense) has overshadowed the appreciation and patience needed to quietly sit with a conceptual painting or sculpture. Kiefer once described his practice as a quest to achieve “representation of the incomprehensible and the non-representational.” The idea of his work will always take precedence over the typical aesthetic material of our time – namely, the Instagram Story.

A large proportion of our daily visitors at the Warehouse were international. I loved our international visitors. But it is difficult for me to believe that now, at twenty-five years old, The Margulies Collection is not better known as an artistic pilgrimage site for Americans, let alone fellow Miamians. I want to see more locals taking the time to appreciate the global culture that is in our

backyard. This is not intended as an ad for the Margulies Collection at the Warehouse. I am merely a local speaking out to fellow locals. I believe that everyone should have the opportunity to be moved by the beautiful and the strange.

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